

11 Can students be knowledge creators? A case study

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Abstract

Enthusiased about Healey's (2017) concept of approaching student learning as a creative process in which students could be partners (see also Healey, Flit, & Harrington, 2016; Healey & Jenkins, 2009), I redesigned one of my existing courses to follow this approach. My case study explores how I introduced students to the concept, the methodology I used to define what research should look like on the course, and how I harnessed students' choices to minimise the potential risks involved for them as well as for myself as a teacher. This is followed by a report on student feedback as well as further reflections on how to redesign learning outcomes and align the assessment format to those outcomes.

Keywords: students as partners, students as knowledge creators, assessment of knowledge creation, alignment of learning outcomes and assessment.

1. Rationale

At conferences focussing on teaching and learning, it is easy to observe that academics tend to participate because they want to find out 'what's out there' in the pedagogy of their discipline; they may like to try new things or have had the kind of feedback from students that encourages them to explore a pedagogical approach which is new to them. Considering students as knowledge creators and therefore partners is quite extreme when it comes to risk-taking:

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- Will the students be willing to be in the driving seat or be fearful or negative about this?
- Will the learning outcomes still be reached, i.e. will this course still be academically sound?
- Will the students' marks be what they expected, i.e. good, leading to a 2.1, at least?
- Will students take me seriously if I pass authority to them; might they see this as an abdication of my duties as 'their' lecturer?
- Will my 'approval rating' in the module evaluations be detrimental to my standing and career?

Following [Healey's \(2017\)](#) TED talk about the benefits of engaging students as 'partners in research and inquiry' at the 2017 University of Birmingham Teaching and Learning Conference, I considered that my final-year course in German studies, *Sex, Submission, and Seduction*, might be suitable for trying myself.

My aim was to get students away from surface learning, and to engage more deeply. I wanted to rouse their interest in research and considered the responsibility of being partners in research a characteristic that demonstrably aligned with my faculty's goal to equip our students "with the knowledge and skills they need to become independent problem-solvers and natural leaders" ([College of Arts and Law, n.d.](#), p. 5).

2. Introducing the students to being knowledge creators

In this 20-credit German module, with two hours of class time for 20 weeks on a Friday afternoon, students are expected to

“gain a **historical perspective** on the **diversity** of women’s writing in the period and on the key topics, be they **negotiated** directly or indirectly: the **place of ‘woman’** in society, the relationship with ‘man’, and the role of relationships in defining one’s **identity**” (Excerpt from module description).

In this case, the ‘historical perspective’ spanned texts from the 19th to the end of the 20th century, from pre-World War I (Bertha von Suttner, Lou-André Salomé, and Theodor Fontane) to post-Reunification (Judith Hermann) via Maxie Wander and Christa Wolf. The diversity of women protagonists in men’s and women’s writing spanned the topics of war, women and education in the bourgeois society or in a socialist society, women and work, and women within their family and in illicit relationships. How women negotiated their identity was to be explored in all of these texts, under those aspects, and through some secondary reading (both historical and sociological).

The course was to be relevant to students in more than one regard: at the end of the course, students should be able to reflect on their own – gendered – identity and relate this to other texts and contexts they would come into contact with – their future workplace, their friendships, their position in the family etc, beyond having something to say about the texts we read and grasping the historical perspective.

The first task, however, was for the students to understand what to expect:

- they could be researchers but there should be nothing to fear;
- research usually did not present one valid answer only, and thus ambiguity had to be embraced;
- being co-creators would entail them taking responsibility for finding answers; this could actually be enjoyable; and
- choices would need to be made by them, not by their teachers.

Following [Brew's \(2012, p. 102\)](#) advice that the notions of 'research' and 'scholarship' need to be clear before one can operate with them in the classroom, I used a technique which I had gleaned from Katarina Mårtensson at a keynote she gave at the EuroSoTL Conference (University of Lund, June 2017). Instead of giving some definitions of 'research', I used images in order to demonstrate research in action: I had taken a number of photos of an art installation at the Charlottenburg Palace Art Gallery in Copenhagen, along one of the most famous harbour quays (Nyhavn) in the world.

Initially, I showed a picture of the installation taken from a distance and asked what the students thought the windows were made of but did not mention the purpose of the building to them ([Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Charlottenburg Palace Art Gallery, from a distance



The students discussed possible answers with each other and with me. Everyone was happy to provide a suggestion. I then showed the installation from close up, i.e. a part of a window ([Figure 2](#)).

It was now clear that the colours which students had seen and which had led their suggestions were of life vests.

Figure 2. Charlottenburg Palace Art Gallery, close-up



After students had expressed their surprise and come to terms with what these objects in the windows actually were, I explained how the process we had just gone through mirrored research.

Research is an iterative process: looking from afar, looking up close, trying out different perspectives, and being aware of one's chosen perspective. However, it's not just about recognising life vests, but it's also about what they might mean to the viewers in the particular context in which they find them: in seafaring Copenhagen, life vests may be an everyday occurrence to many, but that is not the case for a viewer from, say, Birmingham. However, the connection to water is made explicit through the location of the museum along the quays. At the same time, media reports in the summer of 2017, when I had taken the pictures, were replete with images of refugees who had arrived on the Isle of Lesbos in Greece or had been picked up by rescue boats on the Mediterranean. For the inhabitants of Lesbos, the life vests which refugees had abandoned once they were on shore were rubbish, for the refugees on boats in the Mediterranean they might or might not provide safety if they fell into the water (Ecojesuit, 2016). Everyone in the group has their own personal thoughts on the European refugee crisis, some may not ever have been verbally expressed, but my group of students immersed themselves in this exercise and gained some confidence in the fact that we were all equally able participants.

By exchanging first impressions and trying to locate where they came from, students experienced how first impressions may need to be revised, that they are not simply objectively verifiable but can be interpreted differently when set in or associated with different contexts. Currently, a search on Google Images for ‘discarded life jackets on Lesbos’ brings up dozens of photos, from all perspectives, of piles of life jackets in exactly the colour mix which the windows in Copenhagen display, making the idea that research is an iterative process even more tangible. Students were also asked to evaluate their responses: different qualities are valid, not just rational ones but also feelings; however, you need to relate your feelings to the object you perceive convincingly.

Having made sure that students had grasped this concept of research, I confronted them with the challenge: would they want to be researchers in the way I had just demonstrated or did they want to be at the receiving end of ‘teaching’? In order to help students conceptualise the choice, I showed them [Jenkins and Healey’s \(2005\)](#) early diagram on “the role of the teacher and the students” (p. 22).

I ascertained that they were able to relate the diagram to what we had just discussed about research and then asked them to discuss, among themselves, where on the respective axes they wanted to be, and therefore wanted me to be. I left the room for a few minutes, until they were ready to let me know their choice. They told me that they had chosen to be knowledge creators as that was something that nobody had entrusted them with so far, and they were curious to try it out. At this early stage, students showed a promising level of enterprise. However, it is important then to continue with the challenge and require students to make some choices then and there.

3. Choices to make

Students needed to discuss, among themselves, first on how they would like this course to be shaped. It is unrealistic to shape it from scratch at the beginning of the academic year. The course intranet site was already populated with a skeleton structure, there were some set texts, and what I considered a reasonable amount

of time for them, there was a resource list and a discussion board for anyone in the group to post any other sources on our topics which we wanted to share.

Bearing this in mind, students decided that it was difficult to decide on shape straight away. The following suggestions were agreed upon, and subsequently put on the course intranet site for all to refer to during the course.

- Sessions should include presentations on secondary literature; five minutes or more at the beginning of each session, then a discussion to set focus; this demands reading.
- Students want to see where discussions were going in each session; plan next session at end of each session.
- Where there is a choice, they want to read fewer rather than more texts, and have a more detailed discussion and secondary reading.

Following this outline, students were asked to think about the challenges of the course, again without me, the teacher, in the room. After a few minutes, when I was asked to return to the room, it was interesting that they had already started to think about solutions, and during their report to me, included those.

Students realised that they may have different views on which topic or text to concentrate on next. They decided that they would let me, the lecturer, know on a Monday morning, once the class had discussed among themselves (mostly via their Whatsapp group). The group included native speakers of English as well as of German (Erasmus students), and the group decided that we would have discussions in both German and English to benefit both Erasmus and home students. There were no concerns that anyone would be left behind through choice of one or the other language. Students expected their responsibility as co-creators to bring with it a lot of work and pressure, but also the opportunity for them to develop an interest and their language. This, they thought, would allow them to develop ownership and make taking exams ‘normal’. Furthermore, students observed that they were usually tired on a Friday afternoon, but suggested a

coffee and cake break; a loose rota was drawn up, where the responsibility for contributing coffee, tea, a kettle, milk, and edibles were shared out among all, and this relying on others proved justified throughout the year.

Additionally, I was keen to establish ground rules which would limit the risks outlined at the start of this paper. Based on the experience which the group, including the teacher, had of discussions to this point, it was determined that mutual respect would be required, that students/staff needed to talk openly among and to each other and bring to the fore anything that was not going right as well as suggest solutions.

4. Feedback

In informal feedback in class at the end of Semester 1, students thought that the first long text had not been ideal but also considered that that reading experience had given them more appreciation for the other 19th-century texts. As I do not entirely want to lose the topic of that text, ‘war and women’, I have replaced it with one political treatise (Dohm, 1917: ‘Der Missbrauch des Todes’) and one short story (Suttner, 2005/1897): ‘Gott verzeihe ihr’) in 2018/2019.

In order to get more buy-in and less push-back to texts read in class in my modules, I have, on several occasions, sent excerpts of texts I proposed to participants during the summer break and invited them to choose and comment on the reasons for their choice. Whilst students were aware that they had had a choice and comments such as ‘too much reading’ subsequently disappeared completely from student feedback despite them not reading less than before, I have always had very few responses to my invitation to choose, so basing what is being read on those choices did not bring the additional buy-in that I had hoped for nor could it be considered inclusive or democratic.

Students’ formal feedback at the end of the course via the institutional online module evaluation questionnaire was very encouraging. They did indeed consider the course a joint endeavour and in the ‘what could be done

differently' section suggested some more guidance might be needed, but this was not specified further. Students were invested in the course and also acknowledged the lecturer's investment. They commented that the course had been inclusive, nobody felt left behind for reasons of language, background, subject combination, or disability. In my view, the feedback could not have been more positive or constructive. The risk of the teacher losing authority or appearing distant did not materialise. To the contrary: rather than being commented on (negatively) in subsequent feedback, this group of students was able to formulate and embrace what they considered their duties and the division of labour as part of the course.

5. Assessment outcomes

Based on the students' enthusiasm for the course in general and for being in the driving seat, one might have expected that the assessment results would be remarkable too, e.g. that there would be no 2.2 or that there would be several first-class marks, and in the higher category. However, neither was the case. The results were reasonable but considering that the students had formulated – quite taxing – essay questions themselves, I would have expected them to connect their chosen texts to those questions in a more persuasive way. However, their discussions on paper did not go any further than what had been said in class, and that is unusual. No matter the teaching approach of the course, some students usually manage to surprise the reader through integrating further reading and putting their argument in a deeper way than was evident in those students' essays or exams. So the deeper learning which is ostensibly tested in such essay-based assessment formats was not evident or could not be evidenced.

Whilst it seems that the course had achieved learning in terms of social engagement and independent progress-making, measuring such progress turned out not to necessarily be amenable to purely paper-based assessment. Therefore, the assessment format needs changing. This would also satisfy the need to offer a wider breadth of assessment to increase inclusivity, particularly for students whose mental health issues can be made worse by the type of 'ruminative'

thinking required in essay writing (cf. [Watkins & Teasdale, 2001](#)). The question to answer through further research will be whether an assessment format that is more aligned with the express and tacit learning outcomes would result in higher grades or better recognition of the students' efforts.

6. Conclusion

Further research should evaluate to what extent the process of students working as co-creators can be rewarded compared to detailed and in-depth work with the texts themselves, which is what has 'counted' so far. Honing students' expectations to be in the driving seat needs to be a cross-curricular activity, which requires peers to be comfortable with this, and a curriculum that emphasises independent learning. I would encourage colleagues to try students as partners, and experience them in a new light.

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